THE
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DAMON LINKER is the author of *The Theocons: Secular America Under Siege* (Doubleday) and a contributor to such publications as *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New Republic*, and *Slate*. He spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before debating his latest book at a Boisi Center panel event.

OWENS: What motivated you to write *The Theocons*? You say at the end of the book that you wanted to counteract the "significant negative influence of the movement."

LINKER: I worked for *First Things*, which was—still is—the intellectual journal of the movement. As the Bush administration went through 9/11 into 2002 and '03, I began to realize that a lot of things that I thought were not so great about the Bush administration were direct outgrowths of the ideas promulgated by the magazine. By this I mean any number of things. For instance, the kind of theological defense of an aggressive foreign policy and the Iraq war seemed to be influenced by some things that George Weigel had written in our pages. I saw Father Richard John Neuhaus, who's the editor in chief of the magazine and the leading theocon, fly down to Washington to meet with President Bush in the White House and give him pointers on, say, how to sell the anti-gay marriage amendment, which President Bush then endorsed in exactly the terms that Father Neuhaus advocated in our pages. Hadley Arkes, a political theorist who was close to Father Neuhaus and the magazine, spent a lot of time working with very conservative Republican members of Congress about how to plant pro-life premises in the law, by which these people understand trying to pass laws at kind of at the periphery of *Roe v. Wade* so that eventually, when these laws are appealed, the judges or justices on the Supreme Court have to chip away at abortion rights. Now, I'm not stridently pro-choice, but there seemed

to be something a little bit disingenuous about the strategy going on here. So these are some things; there were others as well, but the synergy between the Bush administration and the people I worked with seemed striking to me.

OWENS: Are you worried that an actual theocracy—rule by religious leaders—is a possibility in the United States, despite our constitutional prohibition on religious establishment?

LINKER: No. The theocons are very sophisticated intellectually, and they're not trying to overthrow the non-establishment clause of the First Amendment. They strongly support the non-establishment clause. They're a little unusual in that they say the non-establishment clause is meant to further the free exercise of religion, rather than pitting the two clauses against each other, which has been the norm in American jurisprudence since the 1940s.

But the thing that makes the theocons unique, as opposed to, say, Pat Robertson spouting things that are, fortunately, never going to happen, is that the theocons would like to elide distinctions between politics and religion, so that it doesn't even make much sense any more to talk about whether they want to instill a theocracy. It's more that they want to make it so that your average American's sense of the country's identity is wrapped up with Christianity understood in a certain very conservative sense.

So we'll still have the same form of government, we'll still celebrate the Fourth of July and the Declaration of Independence; but the theocons would like citizens to understand that the principles enumerated in the Declaration are under-

stood within a kind of orthodox Christian way. So when Americans talk about there being individual rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, these are not Lockean precepts but are actually derived from, say, medieval natural law theory. That is closer to what they're trying to get at. They want the country to evolve in such a way that, again, the question about whether we're a secular or a theocratic society is no longer necessary, because through our democracy we become by default a kind of Christianized political system.

OWENS: Separation of church and state is designed, of course, to protect not only the state, but also the church. Do you think that the theoconservative agenda presents dangers to the church?

LINKER: I think it does present a danger to churches. We've seen these threats all throughout Christian history, when the church gets too close to political leaders. And I think you see some of that right now. David Kuo's book, *Tempting Faith*, from the evangelical standpoint, talked about the way the Bush administration manipulated evangelical support for its own purposes while just throwing some pennies in evangelicals' direction.

When it comes to the Catholic Church, which I discuss in my book as more pertinent because the theocons are mostly Catholic theologians, I think the problem has to do with making it seem as if the Catholic Church is a partisan organization in the country. I would put it in these terms. E.J. Dionne, the Catholic op-ed columnist and writer for *The Washington Post*, has spoken very articulately about how if you're a devout Catholic, you really aren't affiliated with either party deep down because on certain issues, economic issues, you're probably more of a Democrat, and on "life" issues and sexuality and personal morality, you might be more of a Republican. But the Republican Party is hostile to the very things that you'd be drawn to in the Democratic Party, and a lot of Democrats are hostile to the things you'd be drawn to in the Republicans. So you stand a step removed from American partisan politics and have to come up with some synthesis of the two. But what you get with the theocons is the attempt to say that abortion is the only thing that matters, or that it matters so much that it trumps everything else. If that's true, then as long as one of the parties is the pro-life party, then a devout Catholic must be a Republican.

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Now, again, the theocons are sophisticated folks. They say this isn't our fault; it's not the church's fault. It's because the Democrats have become stridently pro-choice since 1973, and so we're left with the Republicans. And they've been very shrewd in trying to woo us, and what are we supposed to do? We're pro-life; they're the pro-life party. But that, I think, is a little disingenuous too, that this only becomes an issue if you say that abortion—and euthanasia too, to a lesser extent—that these two things trump everything else. The theocons have been very harsh on members of the Catholic hierarchy who try to have a more nuanced view of the political issues that should matter to Catholics.

So, I think the danger for Catholics is that they come to be perceived as intervening in American politics on the side of one party, namely the Republicans, and then denying Democrats the sacrament of Communion when they're running for office. This is essentially saying a Catholic cannot be a politician and a member of the Democratic party. That's the danger.

OWENS: Is it only conservative Catholics or the theocons that you're worried about, or would you say that all politically engaged Christians have a potentially negative influence on the public square and on the church?

LINKER: At our present moment, I'm only worried about the right, but that's because the right is far closer to power than the left. I could imagine a time in America where it were reversed, when conservative Christians were kind of on the defensive and very lacking in power, whereas the left was threateningly ascendant. If something like liberation theology were very popular in this country, then I could imagine that being a bit of a concern.

But, first of all, that is not true, and I don't see it being true any time soon. For me it's not really a partisan issue so much as a reaction to the current alignment of things in America. That said, at least in the American tradition of these things, I also think that there is less of a tradition of religious leftists proposing views for politics that are as far outside the American tradition, American public life, as the right currently does. I think there is something to the idea that the left—not the religious left, but the left in general—tends to be in favor of more egalitarianism, more access to political power, in favor of democracy, and so forth. To the extent that religion becomes latched onto these things, they end up kind of radicalizing American principles.

In contrast, the right often tries to step outside of American principles and pull toward a kind of anti-democratic sentiment.

I might object to a leftist trying to push too far in the direction of radicalizing these things, because I'm not a radical. But, for instance, very devout orthodox Catholics have a view of authority, especially as it relates to the Church, that is foreign to American liberal democracy. That's not a critique, just a fact. But to the extent that we try to apply those kind of hierarchical, more authoritarian views of power and hierarchy to our system of government, it presents a different kind of threat than the left would.

About the threat to the church itself, I do tend to think that it's always bad when religion becomes too politicized, when the two spheres of religion and politics overlap. You never want to get into a situation where you try to equate the two spheres, where you're trying to say that one is equivalent to the other, that somehow the fate of your soul as a Christian is determined entirely by the role you play in politics or vice versa. Then you start to think about politics in categories derived from religion, and you start to think of religion in terms derived from politics, and it corrupts both.

OWENS: There seems to be almost an irony there on the political side, in that the right normally touts itself as being extremely patriotic, but your point is that the issues the religious right and the theoconservatives are bringing to politics are almost un-American.

LINKER: Well, it depends. I mean, obviously the question of what America is is at stake in this very debate, so that begs the question. But there is some truth to it. For instance, the theocons are very patriotic. If you ask them how they feel about America, they're very pro-America. They support a foreign policy that's extremely aggressive about America and its role in the world, and they feel that God wants us to be instilling order in the

world because no one else is powerful enough to do this.

But this has its limits. As you saw in that notorious symposium in *First Things* in November 1996, when the theocons were presented with Bill Clinton and the spread of various pro-choice judicial findings in the '90s, they responded by a kind of call to arms. They asked whether morally serious, meaning religious, Americans ought to overthrow the government of the United States, because it had become too corrupt by allowing the murder of babies to be protected by the Constitution, if you believe that interpretation of *Roe v. Wade*. So on the one hand, the theocons are very pro-American, at least in their vision of what America is and should be, but on the other hand they are willing to countenance the kind of anti-American radicalism that, say, neoconservatives really never go in for.

OWENS: Why do you think these particular Catholics and Christians wield this power right now?

LINKER: I think they are trying to ride and direct a wave of populist religious rebirth in the country. Even if it isn't called an official "Great Awakening" by future historians, clearly something has been going on in America since, say, the mid-'70s. It's a kind of post-'60s reaction—and I don't mean that in a judgmental way—that has led to a very powerful rebirth of a certain kind of public-spirited religiosity in this country. This phenomenon is occurring mainly among evangelical Protestants, but it is not limited to them; a kind of Christian neo-orthodoxy is cropping up all over the place.

Given this, the theocons have come along and have decided, since the early '80s, that what especially the evangelicals who are leading this trend need is a kind of education in theology and the Christian tradition, and how to think public-spiritedly about their faith, and how to engage in politics. They have been trying to ride the tiger of this populist resurgence that's percolating up from below. The Republican Party has been very successful at capturing a lot of this enthusiasm for its own purposes.

That's why the theocons I look at are so powerful. It's not that they've created this phenomenon. It's that they have sought to direct it, to teach it how to lead and how to make its case in public in terms that appeal to conservative believers in all denominations— conservative Catholics, various conservative Protestants, Mormons, Pentecostals, even a handful of even orthodox Jews. Now these people can all get together and agree that they stand on one side of a cultural chasm, separated from liberal secularists. And

on that orthodox religious side of the chasm, they are kind of an army fighting for virtue and a righteous America against the '60s. Again, it's Neuhaus and the other theocons I look at who have tried to give form and direction to this movement.

OWENS: The most recent Congressional elections, in which 48% of churchgoers voted Democratic, might be construed as a maturing or a broadening of the religious vote. Do you see change, or further change, regarding the role of religion in politics in the United States on the horizon?

LINKER: I think it's too early to say. In the short term, because the Iraq war has gone so very badly for the administration, that could prevent the Republicans from holding together their winning electoral coalition that worked so well for them—especially in 2004, with the 51% of Americans who voted for Bush, and the religious right being the biggest single chunk of voters in that bloc. That was the first time a Presidential candidate had won 51%, a majority, in a long time. But that still was a bare majority, barely over 50%, and to the extent that Iraq continues to be a mess, they're going to have trouble getting to that threshold, so the Democrats might succeed. When things get mixed up that way, because of discontent over Iraq, some of the people breaking off are evangelicals and conservative Catholics. In that sense the religious right agenda might not continue to succeed like it has been.

In the longer term, though, I'm not convinced that we're past this episode. I think that as long as there is a substantial bloc of American voters, roughly a quarter to a third, who are primarily motivated by kind of cultural resentment and a kind of religious repulsion at a certain elite liberal secular perception about these things, there's going to be the potential for a Republican candidate to create a new winning coalition of those voters and some other people. I don't see those voters liberalizing or moderating right now, even if some of them are disenchanted with how Bush handled the Iraq war. I think this is going to be an issue for a long time. Remember, in 1992, it looked like the Moral Majority was gone. Bush, Reagan, 12 years in power, now we've got Clinton, then Clinton again in '96. It seemed like we were having a big party in the country. The economy's going well, no major wars, great. It seemed as if the religious right had been relegated to making a fool of itself by trying to get Clinton impeached over sexual shenanigans in the Oval Office, which ended up helping the President. Yet in 2000, there they were, back in power, more intellectually sophisticated and formidable than ever before. So we've been through these periods before, even in recent history, where it seemed like the religious right was on its way out, and then they came back. I wouldn't write them off just yet.

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OWENS: You referred briefly to the Mormons earlier, and I know you recently wrote an article in *The New Republic* about Mitt Romney's Mormonism. Do you think it's fair to ask politicians to defend the sometimes rather extraordinary doctrinal tenets of their faith?

LINKER: I would say that ideally, we wouldn't be doing this. But the irony here is that it is precisely because of the rise of the religious right that we must ask these questions. Politicians were willing to take the Kennedy stance in 1960, where he stood up for the Baptist ministers of Houston, Texas, and said, yes, I'm a Catholic, I would be the first Catholic President; but my Catholicism is not going to fundamentally determine what I do in office because, in office, I'm President first, and those duties that come with that Oval Office supersede or override any other concerns or assumptions or beliefs I might have. On the one hand, if politicians say that, as most Democrats still to this day tend to do, including the Mormon Senate majority leader—Harry Reid who's a Democrat whose Mormonism really never comes up in his own duties in office—then that would be fine with me, for the most part. It might be interesting to learn a bit more about these views. On the other hand, is the question of whether Mormonism is compatible with that kind of compartmentalization. That's an open question that may be worth raising. But it wouldn't be a fundamental issue like I think it is now.

The reason it's fundamental now is precisely because the religious right has gotten so powerful in the Republican party that the Republican party believes that a candidate's religious faith should be at the core of the politician's identity, and somehow ground or fundamentally be a part of the politician's ambitions for office and his agenda. So you're supposed to kind of give a kind of public testimony of your faith, and to say explicitly, like Romney recently did, that we should never have an atheist President in this country.

Once you've done that, religion is on the table. And if religion's on the table, it's on the table, and we're going to talk

about it. If you don't want it on the table, then take it off. That's what the religious right is now stuck with. So to the extent they want religion to be the thing we talk about in politics, it's going to be talked about, even when it's things that make them a little bit uncomfortable.

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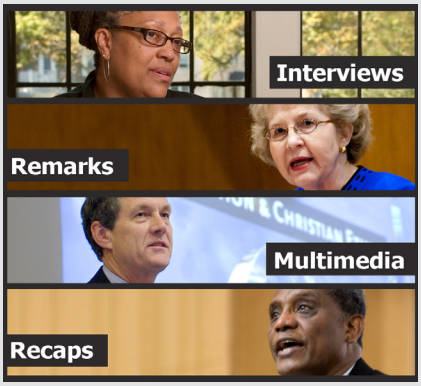

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